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Researching and intervening with Vygotsky: a focus on adult learning and development

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Main theses

1. Vygotsky's work today offers powerful resources to overcome the limits of "mainstream" psychology.
 - Esp. regarding **relations between practice and theory**
 - (Transformative social) practice as the cornerstone of theoretical development
 - *Concrete psychology* as abstract development of a psychology of the human subject
2. Vygotsky's work, mostly dedicated to the development of the child, is a psychology not only of the child but of *human development*. It is highly relevant for the study of *adult learning and development*, i.e. lifelong development, professional learning, etc.
3. One way to pursue Vygotsky's work today is through *intervention* based on the construction of *dialogical frames* for collective reflection and transformation.

Part 1

RENEWING PSYCHOLOGY BASED ON VYGOTSKY'S HERITAGE

Vygotsky on practice and theory

- Rethinking an epistemology of psychology, which strongly anchors research in practice.
- Practice is seen as the cornerstone of theoretical engagement and development, and theory is simultaneously critical for the further development of practice.
- Development as the research object and the research method. (Vygotsky, 1927/1999).
- French reception of Vygotsky: fertile in the field of work psychology for social and scientific reasons. Received by the ergonomists as a theoretician of practice.

Vygotsky and the concrete psychology of human beings (Vygotsky, 1929)

« My history of cultural development is the abstract development of a concrete psychology » (p.246, French edition, my own translation).

« I only want to say that without the human being (the operator), taken in his entirety, we can not explain the operation of the device (the brain); **this is the human being who controls the brain, not the brain that controls the human being**; that without the human being, we can not understand his behavior, and **psychology must be understood not in terms of process but in terms of drama** » (p°249)

« See Politzer: psychology=drama»

G. Politzer on Concrete Psychology and Drama

- *Critique des fondements de la psychologie*, 1928, Rieder (new edition Quadrige 2003, English edition 1994).
- A crisis of psychology as a science: science lost in a “fog pond”
 - “No more verbal disputes. Calculemus! The logarithms are drawn by the hair and Ribot calculates the number of brain cells to know if they can accommodate all the ideas. Scientific psychology was born ».
- This criticism is still fully relevant:
 - « Their scientific needs are satisfied by the handling of apparatus, even if sterile, and by obtaining a few statistics which are used not to survive their publication, they proclaim that science is made of patience, and they reject all control and criticism on the pretext that "metaphysics" has nothing to do with science ».

Criticizing « abstraction » in psychology

- « Abstraction eliminates the subject and assimilates the psychological facts to the objective facts, that is to the facts in 3rd person » (p°38)
- « What characterizes, on the contrary, Freud's approach to the problem of dreams is that he does not accomplish abstraction. He does not want to detach the dream from the subject who dreams it; **he does not want to conceive of it as a state in the third person, he does not want to situate it in a void without a subject.** It is by attaching it to the subject of whom it is the dream that he wants to restore its character of psychological fact. »

Resisting agency: a void without subject?

- Resisting some views of agency - agency in recent psychological work is at risk of being “a void without a subject”. Ex: “agency of the students”
- Other concepts may grasp the transformative power of subjects better: Spinoza’s “power to act”, Holzkamp’s “Handlungsfähigkeit”, Clot’s “development of the power to act”, or the Russian word “Subjectness”.

Human life, drama and human action

- « These are *events* that the subject lives, and the term "event" expresses that the whole subject is concerned. (...) We have therefore left **the plane of the "human drama" of which the author is the concrete individual**, and it has been replaced by an abstract drama. In the first case, the individual is something essential, in the second, the real actors are impersonal and the individual plays at most an impresario role. This is the true meaning of abstraction: **classical psychology seeks to replace personal drama by an impersonal drama, the drama of which the actor is the concrete individual who is a reality, by a drama whose actors are mythological creatures: abstraction consists, in the last analysis, in admitting the equivalence of these two dramas, to assert that the impersonal drama, the "real", explains the personal drama which is only "apparent."** The ideal of classical psychology consists in the search for purely "notional" dramas ». (p°52)
- « It is the gesture enlightened by narrative which is the psychological fact and not the gesture apart, nor the actual content of the narrative. »

Methodological consequences

« Le point de vue du psychologue est celui qui coïncide avec le drame ». (p°248)

« **the point of view of the psychologist is those which concords with the drama** »

How can we push this Vygotskian agenda (focus on development, focus on indirect methodologies, focus on concrete psychology) forward?

3 perspectives on Concreteness:

- M. Cole and al., 5thD (Cole, Kobelt & Parker, 2014): “organized frameworks” embedded in social intervention, practical involvement
- Critical Psychology, for ex. (Nissen, 2013): “Concrete Utopia”
- Clinic of Activity (Clot et al.): Psychological Activity as interpersonal and intrapersonal polyphony; Cross Self Confrontations as developmental & dialogical organized frameworks for collaborative work analysis

Part II – Pushing this agenda forward

**PSYCHOLOGY OF ADULT LEARNING &
DEVELOPMENT: CREATING DIALOGICAL
FRAMEWORKS FOR DRAMATIC INTERACTIONS**

Example of an intervention-research conducted in the field of criminal justice

- Double temporality: time of action, time of research. “Fundamental field research” (“recherche fondamentale de terrain”) (Clot, 2008).
- European project on interagency collaboration between mental health services and criminal justice services (RISE Marie-Curie project COLAB).
- Fieldwork in the UK with a local organisation from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), active in the field of social rehabilitation for people going out of prison since 2005 (especially through-the-gate mentoring).
- Hybridizing Activity Clinic (Clot, 1999) and Change Lab (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, Virkkunen et al., 1996).

Intervening and researching in a context of crisis

A context of social and organisational crisis :

- Changing landscape of probation in UK. Very controversial organisation.
- Tensions within the organisation, partly reflecting the wider economic and social tensions of the landscape.
- Collective work almost impossible at that step.

How to design an intervention which would help the organisation (re)build internal and external dialogue?

Intervention and research methodology

- Meeting people at the local organisation and discussing both the situation and the research;
- Observations and shadowing (first meetings between a mentor and a potential mentee; assessment of mentee needs, in prison and after release; planned regular meetings with mentees in public places; emergency interventions with a mentee; everyday interactions through phone or WhatsApp; reporting of these interactions in the information system, etc.)
- Experiences of 19 different stakeholders, including staff, volunteers and beneficiaries, of working with and for the organisation were explored in individual interviews
- Developmental workshop

Data analysis: mentoring in practice

The analytical work of the data identified main aspects of mentoring in practice:

- Difficult emotional work, steep learning, and the difficulties of settings boundaries
- Multi-dimensional support, interplay of technical help and higher-level support (social recognition, renormalisation)
- Boundary-crossing role of the organisation in the complex local ecology of CJS and support services

Dialogical artifacts

“User stories” as dialogical artefacts to engage the participants

Client Adrian – selected quotes from our interview

I met (staff member) actually while I was in prison because he goes into the prison to talk. So I filled in the leaflet and he came and saw me because I had no family, I was homeless before I went to prison, and I needed support. Funnily enough, I found the leaflet because they don't really clean the cells when people move in, and someone else in my cell had obviously had one, so that's how I found it. But I suppose if I'd have asked for one, I'd have got one, but I didn't know about it, so that was lucky. Well, it was all geared up for when I got out. I mean, I met him, I'd actually seen him meeting someone else about seven months before my release, so I spoke to him and he said, well I'll come and see you nearer the date. And then they had an open day in the education block where there were lots of different agencies, people from work and probation, and (staff member) was there. He had a bowl of sweets so I was eating the sweets [laughs], but and then when he did come for the appointment he said this is what I can help you with; life, work, help you get, lots of different things, support, and since I've been out I think it's been great. I had a period of time where I relapsed on the drugs and I wasn't really seeing him (...)

because when you come out of prison you don't have much money, I had no clothes, (another staff member) bought me some clothes and a cheap phone with credit, and then after that, because there's Universal Credit benefit but it takes a long time. (...) Nine weeks to get my money so that's a long time, you know. So, in that time, they would get me a food bank voucher, I don't know if they still do it, they used to get an Asda voucher so you could get some food, little things like this. But also, in support, (staff member), he's just support... I just phoned him today because I was going to meet him after you but he's a bit busy so he's going to meet me tomorrow, but he could tell straight away because I'm bit upset today, having to move back and that. Because I have no family, see, no family whatsoever. The family I did have are dead and I've been on my own for many years in addiction, so it's nice to have... okay, probation is cool, but probation more have a set job, don't they? They have to lower the risk of me reoffending which is good, but someone like (staff members) maybe yourself, you're more support, practical support, can help with lots of things from forms, phone calls, all the way down to just an ear to listen, and this is good for some people. People who don't really have family, I think sometimes just want someone separate to their life to offload, does that make sense? (...)

I think you've got probation but like again, sometimes you have this barrier with probation, you're scared to tell them everything, you know, but with them, you're not, because you can trust them. Obviously, there's boundaries but you know they're there, but yeah, a lot of people that come out of prison are just left, a lot of people come out of prison in this country and are homeless straight away and there's no one there to help them. And a lot of people who've been in prison feel a barrier between authority. (...) I always did. I always felt like I can't talk to this person, can't talk to that person. I think I'm doing alright at the minute with (Charity name). I think I'm so glad they didn't close my case, because they could have, because I went missing for a while, but instead they just picked the support straight up, and it's nice isn't it? Because not looking for sympathy but in my life, you're used to people letting you down, but they don't let you down .

Analysis by the participants

Discussion in the workshop between staff following the individual reading of Adrian's story (excerpt)

R: So according to Adrian, what's important in (organisation's name) service?

P1: "Having someone to talk to".

P2: He thinks we've got "a different agenda from probation" on the issues of offending.

P3: This is really interesting, isn't it?

P4: "Not being let down, not having any family", that's what really jumped out at me. So it's interesting that we've all got different things that jump out at us isn't it? (nervous laughs)

P5: (Staff member) uses sweets to get people to do things.

P6: That's a standard! (big laughs)

P4: Well I like the first sentence actually. "I met (staff member) while I was in prison because he goes into the prison to talk".

P1: I think this is a perfect scenario of a (Charity name) client from the beginning when we reach someone in jail.

P6: I don't think so. I'd probably buy about one or two mobile phones a year and I've never, ever, bought anyone clothes, so that's definitely not.

P3: Yes it's really interesting, it is really interesting about the difference between what he says. It's really, really interesting.

R: What do you think is interesting P3?

P3: For me, I would almost cry that he didn't think we were interested in helping him stop offending, that to me - to me - is the core of what it is about, it's helping people progress away from the criminal lifestyle. But here for him he thinks that doesn't matter to us...

P1: Why do you think so?

P3: Because he said that we have a different agenda from probation, the whole agenda.

P1: Ha...

R: It's interesting because you also picked this one, P2, different agenda from probation?

P2: I did make a joke, but yeah, even if I go back in offending, I'll have people there who will still work with me so...

P3: Yes, which is a good tip. I think we do want people to feel we don't give up and that they can be honest.

P4: Well personally I think we need to be different from probation because if we're going to be the same as probation then what are we doing?"

Micro-drama and perezhivanie as analytical tools

- Surprisingly for the researcher, when these user stories were shared in the workshop, they were read by the participants in an unexpected way . It seemed at that time that all participants were cherry-picking very different elements, expressions or sentences, from these stories, and that none of them focused on the three main dimensions identified by the researcher in her own analysis.
- Taking the unexpected seriously.
- The dialogical artefact is refracted in the perezhivanie of the participants in very meaningful ways.
- The efforts of the researcher to construct a dialogical frame support the construction of the problem space in which the main tension emerging (positioning regarding probation) can possibly be discussed (this is open...)

Conclusion

- Vygotsky's heritage opens work for reconstructing an epistemology for practice and theory in psychology, and consistent methodologies of research
- Keeping the subject at the very centre of all psychological analyses - not "a void without a subject" !
- Escaping pure narrative analysis, and joining the analysis of human action and of its subjective meaning. Engaging research participants into the analysis and transformation of the activity
- Constructing dialogical frames, fed by research thanks to dialogical artefacts, which materialize polyphony and micro-dramas.
- Perekhivanie here serves as a useful analytical tool to understand the surprises of intervention.

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Please, feel free to contact me if you have any question !

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